

IS THERE A WOMEN'S LITERATURE IN POST-MODERN SPAIN? THE WRITERS' RESPONSE

The “special” and double-edged position of “women’s literature” – it is at once highly marketed and rendered invisible – makes critics uncomfortable and makes authors wonder whether the category itself may lead women writers into a trap

Christine Henseler

The question as to whether it is possible to ascribe a gender difference to writing has repeatedly been addressed as a constant in interviews with Spanish women authors of the post-war and democracy periods.¹ While most female authors born during the Franco regime tend to reject the notion of a women’s literature, the trend among the more contemporary women writers is to celebrate this gender difference, and to consider that writing by women is different from writing by men. Thus, Lucía Etxebarria (born in 1966) champions women’s literature in her essay ‘Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura femenina’:

La literatura femenina, en general, amalgama un mismo punto de vista expresado desde diferentes voces, la perspectiva que emana de nuestra propia naturaleza de mujeres. Tenemos nuestro propio estilo y ámbito de creación, porque la creación es inherente a lo que el escritor o la escritora vive’.²

On the other hand, the more veteran Carmen Posadas (born in 1953) defends that, whereas there is a male and a female viewpoint, ‘al final sólo hay buena literatura y mala literatura’.³ Whereas her opinions are representative of the trend supported by most of her contemporaries, these arguments appear to expose the main tendencies in the literary market contended by women writers nowadays. Among these, their

¹ Luis García, ‘Entrevista a Almudena Grandes’, *Literaturas.com* (2002) <<http://www.literaturas.com/EntrevistaAGrandes2002.htm>> [accessed 22 June 2010]; María del Mar López-Cabral, ‘Esther Tusquets. Entrevista’, en *Palabras de mujeres* (Madrid: Narcea, 2000), pp. 151-166; Santiago Velázquez, ‘Rosa Regás: “Hoy sólo se habla de literatura en los jurados de los premios”’, *Espéculo*, 19 (2002) <<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero19/regas.html>> [accessed 22 June 2010]; Marta Salvador, ‘Entrevista a Espido Freire (II)’, *Mujeractual.com* <<http://www.mujeractual.com/entrevistas/freire/index3.html>> [accessed 22 June 2010]; África Prado, ‘Laura Freixas: “Es falso que haya un boom de la literatura femenina”’, *Información.es* <<http://www.diarioinformacion.com/cultura/2010/02/23/falso-haya-boom-literatura-femenina/982279.html>> [accessed 22 June 2010]; among many others.

² Lucía Etxebarria, ‘Con nuestra propia voz: a favor de la literatura de mujeres’, in *La letra futura* (Barcelona: Destino, 2000)

³ ‘Entrevista. Diario de Navarra’, *Carmen Posadas.net* <<http://www.carmenposadas.net/res-ent-not-ficha.php?resentnot=53>> [accessed 22 June 2010]

opinions mainly evidence the existence of segregation policies and of negative allusions to women authors' sex and gender in the literary criticism and literary market fields.

This article will start with a brief introduction to Laura Freixas' analysis of the main trends affecting women in the literary industry at the present moment. Special emphasis will be placed on the coexisting policies of integration and segregation, as well as on the commonly made allusions to sex and gender in works by women authors. These trends are particularly linked to the question of how literature by women should be treated. Overall, as we shall see, the writers quoted challenge the critical establishment's treatment of women's literature as a literature that only has women characters as its protagonists, and that is only aimed at a female readership, for it only deals with 'women's issues'.

Is women's literature different from men's literature? Or is it just treated differently?

Laura Freixas' canonical analysis of the situation of Spanish women writers in the year 2000 was informed by a series of trends that have shaped the publishing industry as we know it today.⁴ These trends, intimately linked to the recentness of the mass incorporation of women writers into the literary market, are ultimately tied in with the question of the existence of a women's literature.

Freixas starts her argument by noticing that today, women writers are highly visible and 'accessible' through their appearances in different media, which according to her creates the illusion that women are a majority in the literary market (Freixas, p. 38). Glossy photographs of women writers often inundate literary articles in prestigious magazines such as *Qué Leer* and *Época*; and the review and comment of their texts on popular television programs can even lead to all sorts of personal questions.⁵ As a result of their promotional visibility, Henseler explains, women authors have become

⁴ See also Laura Freixas, 'Mujeres y cultura: una breve arqueología de la misoginia reinante', *Letras libres*, October 2005 <<http://www.lettraslibres.com/index.php?art=10774>> [accessed 17 August 2010]

⁵ In her role as editor of *Lo que los hombres no saben. El sexo contado por las mujeres* (2008), Lucía Etxebarria was interviewed by Marta Robles as part of the book launching. The interview, broadcasted on *Telemadrid* on the 17th of March of 2008, soon left the literary arena to move on to much more intimate questions. To watch the complete interview, see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgX1aORFios>> [accessed 5 July 2010]

commercial icons,⁶ which comes in clear contrast to their numerical inferiority in the literary market. In effect, after learning that the number of writers that had published narrative books in 1999 in the main Spanish publishing houses (Alfaguara, Anagrama, Destino, Planeta, Plaza y Janés, Seix Barral, and Tusquets) was 129, Laura Freixas concluded that the proportion of women was of only 24% (Freixas, pp. 35-36). It is interesting to note that, conversely to the number of women writers whose books get published, the majority of readers are women (Freixas, p. 39). Thus, after compiling and analysing three reading polls carried out by the Spanish Ministry of Social Affairs in 1978, 1985, and 1990, sociologist Enrique Gil Calvo concluded that, in Spain, the number of women readers is superior, both in absolute and in relative terms, to the number of male readers.⁷

As a consequence of their greater visibility and wider readership, most publishing houses and literary institutions are keen to attract women (Freixas, p. 39). This could be due to the fact that, according to writer Clara Obligado, the destiny of a book is sealed before it arrives to the bookshops. Hence, although each author can have a certain say in the way their book will be presented, and even though there is always a small margin of error; publishing houses already know whether the book will sell or not. This could depend on the promotional material invested on each book and on how popular the author is, and these coordinates are more apparent in the case of women writers because they have become commercial icons.⁸ On the other hand, most academic studies and research on literature by women seldom reaches the general public (Freixas, p. 39). This could be simply due to the fact that Women's Studies are based on the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Given that most feminist criticism bibliography is written in English, it would be logical to expect that the majority of experts in Spanish women authors are Anglo-American, or Spaniards working at Anglosaxon institutions (Freixas, p. 81). Women writers' participation at Spanish literary institutions parallels this virtual lack of academic studies on their works. With the exception of some notable authors such as Ana María Matute, women writers are

⁶Christine Henseler, *Contemporary Spanish Women's Narrative and the Publishing Industry* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

⁷Enrique Gil Calvo, *La era de las lectoras. El cambio cultural de las mujeres españolas* (Madrid: Instituto de la Mujer, Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales, 1983), p. 120.

⁸Clara Obligado. 'Autobiographical sketches', in Christine Henseler, *Contemporary Spanish Women's Narrative and the Publishing Industry* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 131-133.

rarely represented in the most traditional and prestigious institutions. The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, for example, counts forty three male members and only four female ones. Another trend currently contended by women writers refers to the fact that both integration and segregation policies coexist in the literary market. Thus, while some anthologies displaying a universal thematic thread only include male authors, other anthologies are limited to women authors. Likewise, mentions to women authors' sex and gender are relatively common, and often made in a negative light, in the literary criticism field. On the other hand, allusions to the question of male identity in the case of a male author, his readers, or his characters are virtually unknown.

In fact, the way women authors contend with all these trends will determine their commercial success or their literary prestige. Generally, the more commercially successful she is, the less highly regarded her work in terms of its literary significance or prestige. The last two trends are particularly significant when considering each woman writer's views on the question of the existence of a female literature. Women writers often denounce the absence or misrepresentation of women authors in mixed anthologies, prizes, or congresses. For instance, none of the works examined in the volume *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea*, which has a clearly mixed approach, has been written by a female author.⁹ This seems striking when one considers that immigration is a very real and very current phenomenon in today's Spain, affecting men and women alike. Furthermore, the number of women immigrants has risen sharply in recent years, partly due to increasing demand for workers to do jobs with low pay and prestige. For example, most of the workforce in the domestic service sector is female. Likewise, no female authors are studied in *La literatura española en el exilio: un estudio comparativo*, even though nothing in the title suggests that the book will only deal with male authors.¹⁰ When female writers attempt to fight this misrepresentation by creating women-only collections and events, they will in this way make a case for women writers and will encourage the open public to take them into consideration. However, this self-exclusion will give the impression of a literary space of their own, and the exclusion of men only ultimately

⁹ Irene Andrés-Suárez, Marco Kunz, and Inés D'Ors (eds.), *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea* (Madrid: Verbum, 2002)

¹⁰ Michael Ugarte, *La literatura española en el exilio: un estudio comparativo* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1999)

reinforces the segregation these same women are attempting to redress. As Henseler puts it, ‘the “special” and double-edged position of “women’s literature” – it is at once highly marketed and rendered invisible – makes critics uncomfortable and makes authors wonder whether the category itself may lead women writers into a trap’ (Henseler, p. 16). In this respects, Almudena Grandes explains that it is the absence of the term ‘male literature’ what makes her uncomfortable: ‘No me gusta el término ‘literatura femenina’, aunque no tendría ningún inconveniente en admitirlo si existiera el término ‘literatura masculina’.¹¹ Espido Freire, on the other hand, warns against the risks involved in the use of the term ‘literatura femenina’ by the critical establishment: ‘Una de las maneras más frecuentes de discriminación es la que impone la dictadura de la llamada *literatura femenina* [...] cada vez que se menciona que un autor o una autora escribe literatura femenina inmediatamente se le está despreciando’.¹²

Women writers have tended to respond in one of two ways when asked whether the labels of ‘feminine’ or ‘feminist’ could be applied to their works. Either to deny the existence of gender difference in writing and to suggest such labelling ghettoises writing by women, or to admit to and celebrate gender difference. Thus, on the one hand, writers such as Dulce Chacón deny the existence of a women’s literature and contend that such a label looks down on female writers:

La literatura femenina no existe, existe una literatura escrita por mujeres y una literatura escrita por hombres, escrita por homosexuales, escrita por morenos, por rubios, por pelirrojos... Pero solamente a la literatura escrita por mujeres se le pone un apelativo, ‘femenina’. Eso me parece que es menospreciar a la mujer que escribe. La literatura no necesita de adjetivos, es universal.¹³

On the other hand, the trend supported by authors such as Laura Freixas avows that female literature is different from writing by men. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that literature by women has been traditionally marked by its

¹¹Encuentro digital con Almudena Grandes’, *20minutos.es*
<<http://www.20minutos.es/entrevistas/almudena-grandes/51/>> [accessed 25 June 2010]

¹² Espido Freire, ‘Conferencia: “Problemática de la mujer en la juventud”’, *El Correo Digital*
<<http://servicios.elcorreo.com/auladecultura/freire1.html>> [accessed 25 June 2010]

¹³ Vicente Alapont, ‘Entrevista a Dulce Chacón’, *Mujeractual.com*
<<http://www.mujeractual.com/entrevistas/chacon/index.html>> [accessed 25 June 2010]

authors' feelings of inadequacy, inferiority and self-doubt which result from their education.¹⁴ According to them, these 'phenomena of *inferiorization* mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart' (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 50). Whereas the foci of difference have never been unanimously established, what it is widely recognised by critics such as Hélène Cixous,¹⁵ and Anette Kolodny,¹⁶ and by authors such as Lucía Etxebarria (2000), and Laura Freixas that women's writing has brought new topics, a different sensitivity, and new character models to literature: 'creo que existe una literatura femenina o de mujeres con características propias [...] La [aportación] más específica se centra en ampliar la gama de personajes femeninos y presentarlos como personajes con valor por sí mismos y en sus relaciones entre mujeres y no sólo con los hombres'.¹⁷

Interestingly, Tsuchiya notes that in Spain, perhaps because their life experiences parallel the increasingly promotional demands of the book market, the latter trend is generally followed by the generation born in the 1960s and 1970s (Tsuchiya, p. 240). In her essay 'The "new" Female Subject and the Commodification of Gender in the Works of Lucía Etxebarria', Tsuchiya explores the process by which Etxebarria, like so many other women writers in the Spanish literary market nowadays, exploits the market through the treatment of a series of 'temas de moda'. By doing this, Etxebarria contributes to the creation of a 'new' readership from which the publishing industry can benefit at the same time.¹⁸ Thus, for writers such as Espido Freire or Lucía Etxebarria, the often denounced 'selling out' of the publishing industry is a natural part of their lives. On the other hand, the life experiences of most writers born under

¹⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 59-60.

¹⁵ In 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways/Forays', Hélène Cixous proposes difference, multiplicity and heterogeneity as a means to combat the binary patriarchal system. See Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways/Forays' in *The Feminist Reader. Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 101-116, (p. 101).

¹⁶ For Anette Kolodny, the individual consideration of each author would allow us to observe if any particular stylistic patterns recur in female fiction. She finds reflexive perception and inversion to be the most persistent ones. Reflexive perception takes place when a character finds herself, or parts of herself, in unexpected or incomprehensible situations. Inversion, on the other hand, happens when the stereotypical images of women in literature are subverted with the purpose of humour, revelation of their hidden reality, or connotation of their opposites. See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 70-71.

¹⁷ María Bengoa, 'Laura Freixas. El camino es fácil para el escritor serio y para la escritora frívola', *El Correo* 7th June 2000, <<http://www.laurafreixas.com/freixascriticas4.htm>> [accessed 25 June 2010]

¹⁸ Akiko Tsuchiya, 'The "new" Female Subject and the Commodification of Gender in the Works of Lucía Etxebarria', *Romance Studies*, 20, 1 (2002), 77-87.

Franco are not detached from the civil war and Transition periods. Women authors born in this period, such as Esther Tusquets, tend to reject the notion of a women's literature. Tusquets, for instance, denounces the segregation of women's writings that the critical establishment carries out through the inclusion of what she calls 'el apartado de las mujeres', which is usually presented as separate from what is considered as serious, universal literature.¹⁹

As we have seen, Spanish women writers have, over the years, tried to contend this persistent, long-lasting situation. In fact, despite the work done by so-called second generation feminists, it is striking that writers of the stature of Montero, Grandes, or Tusquets – to name a few – still have, in the early years of the 21st century, to denounce the way their works are treated by a critical establishment which is traditionally male. This segregation has been made even worse by the increasing commercialisation of book-selling, which makes it especially difficult for women writers to balance their public image and their work.

¹⁹ Geraldine C. Nichols, *Escribir. Espacio propio. Laforet, Matute, Moix, Tusquets, Riera y Roig por sí mismas*. (Minneapolis, MN: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literatures, 1989), p. 80.